USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Gulf of Mexico Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries GoMI

Overview
The Gulf of Mexico region hosts an amazing array of natural treasures – coral reefs, lagoons, vast meadows of sea grass, and more than half the nation's coastal wetlands. More than 1.3 billion pounds of seafood come out of the Gulf each year. More than 50 percent of all recreational fishing in the United States happens in the Gulf.

After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the federal government established the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, a joint federal body. The group was directed to develop an ecosystem strategy to including interested citizens and partnering organizations.

In December 2011, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Gulf of Mexico Initiative (GoMI) to improve water quality and enhance fish and wildlife habitat. GoMI was designed to provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in selected priority watersheds in the Gulf region.

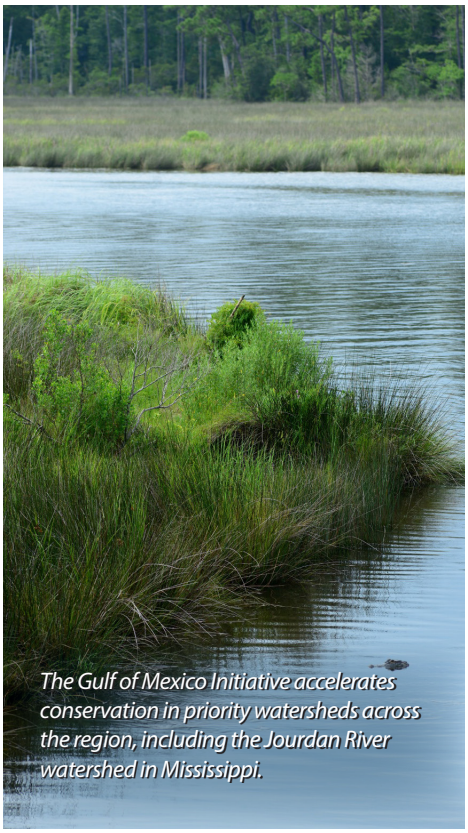
Priorities
The initiative was designed to help producers in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas improve water quality and ensure sustainable production of food and fiber. Goals were established to help agricultural producers voluntarily implement a combination of core and supporting practices that: reduce the amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment leaving fields; reduce agricultural impacts on water quality and quantity; and improve wildlife habitat.

NRCS engaged state and federal agencies, local partners and producers to identify river systems draining into the Gulf of Mexico with substantial agriculture-related nutrient and sediment loading issues and opportunities to build upon existing conservation efforts. Sixteen priority watersheds were selected in seven major river basins, including Weeks Bay, Escambia River, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary, Mermentau Basin, Jourdan River and the Lower San Antonio River.

Funding Sources
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) (formerly the Wetlands Reserve Program)

Results
In fiscal year 2014, NRCS invested $2.2 million through EQIP to fund 92 contracts to support conservation activities on nearly 17,000 acres in the five GoMI states. Since GoMI was created, NRCS has dedicated about $7.3 million through EQIP to help 260 producers to implement conservation practices on 60,000 acres in priority Gulf of Mexico watersheds. Meanwhile, NRCS has invested more than $3.5 million in conservation easements in fiscal years 2012 and 2013.



The Gulf of Mexico Initiative accelerates conservation in priority watersheds across the region, including the Jourdan River watershed in Mississippi.

2014 Progress Report

Helping People Help the Land

Feature Story

An Alabama Family Farm Helps Send Cleaner Water to the Gulf of Mexico

Days before planting season in April, up to 26 inches of rain had fallen in southern Alabama over a span of two days. This rain event caused historic flooding in Baldwin County, in a coastal part of the state, where farmers had freshly tilled fields in preparation for planting crops.

Many of the farms in the Fish River watershed with tilled fields lost valuable topsoil during the flood. But the outcome was different for Tim Mullek and his family, who grow cotton, peanuts, soybeans, wheat and corn on about 2,500 acres in the Fish River watershed, located about 20 miles from the Gulf of Mexico.

Fish River suffers from substantial nutrient and sediment pollution, and Mullek is one of the farmers and ranchers in the region working to improve water quality downstream.

The Fish River flows into Weeks Bay, an estuarine area of great importance to the eastern Mobile Bay system. This highly productive area serves as a nursery for commercially important shellfish and finfish, as well as a diverse array of other flora and fauna, including rare, threatened and endangered species. Weeks Bay acts as a filter for nutrients and sediments, provides shoreline stabilization, and offers recreational and educational opportunities for the local population and tourists.

Mullek is a no-till farmer whose fields were planted with cover crops when the rains fell. He said soil losses were minimal, proving that cover crops protected the land and the quality of runoff water delivered to the Gulf.

"We are a no-till farm, and we had very little soil erosion," Mullek said.

The Mulleks worked with NRCS to develop a conservation plan that includes water and soil quality improvements, along with implementing conservation practices that improve soil health, manage nutrients and reduce the amount of sediment and pesticides that leave their property. The benefits of implementing these practices became apparent after the rain event. They also use precision agriculture technology to apply nutrients and pesticides using a global positioning system, or GPS, and programs like "swath control," which can turn sections of a planter on or off to guarantee the fields are not over-seeded or over-fertilized.

"I want to be a good steward of the land," Mullek said. "I want to keep the fertilizer in my field and not in the creek. I want the land to be here when I am gone."

The family has been receiving technical assistance from NRCS for many years. Through GoMI, they have received financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to plant cover crops and implement precision agriculture.

The Mulleks plant cover crops and practice no-till and strip-till farming on all of their land. They are certain that planting cover crops and using crop rotation has also increased organic matter in their fields. Healthy soils can absorb and retain more water, making them less susceptible to runoff and erosion and ensure water is available when crops need it.

Tim Mullek grows cotton, peanuts, soybeans, wheat and corn on about 2,500 acres in the Fish River watershed in southern Alabama.

Fiscal Year 2014 Gulf of Mexico Initiative
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

	Contracts	Acres	Obligations
Alabama	17	4,678	$390,900
Florida	42	3,598	$846,613
Louisiana	21	3,847	$776,525
Mississippi	5	360	$84,617
Texas	7	4,215	$141,043
Total	**92**	**16,698**	**$2,239,698**

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, January 2015.

For more information, visit: nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives

Helping People Help the Land